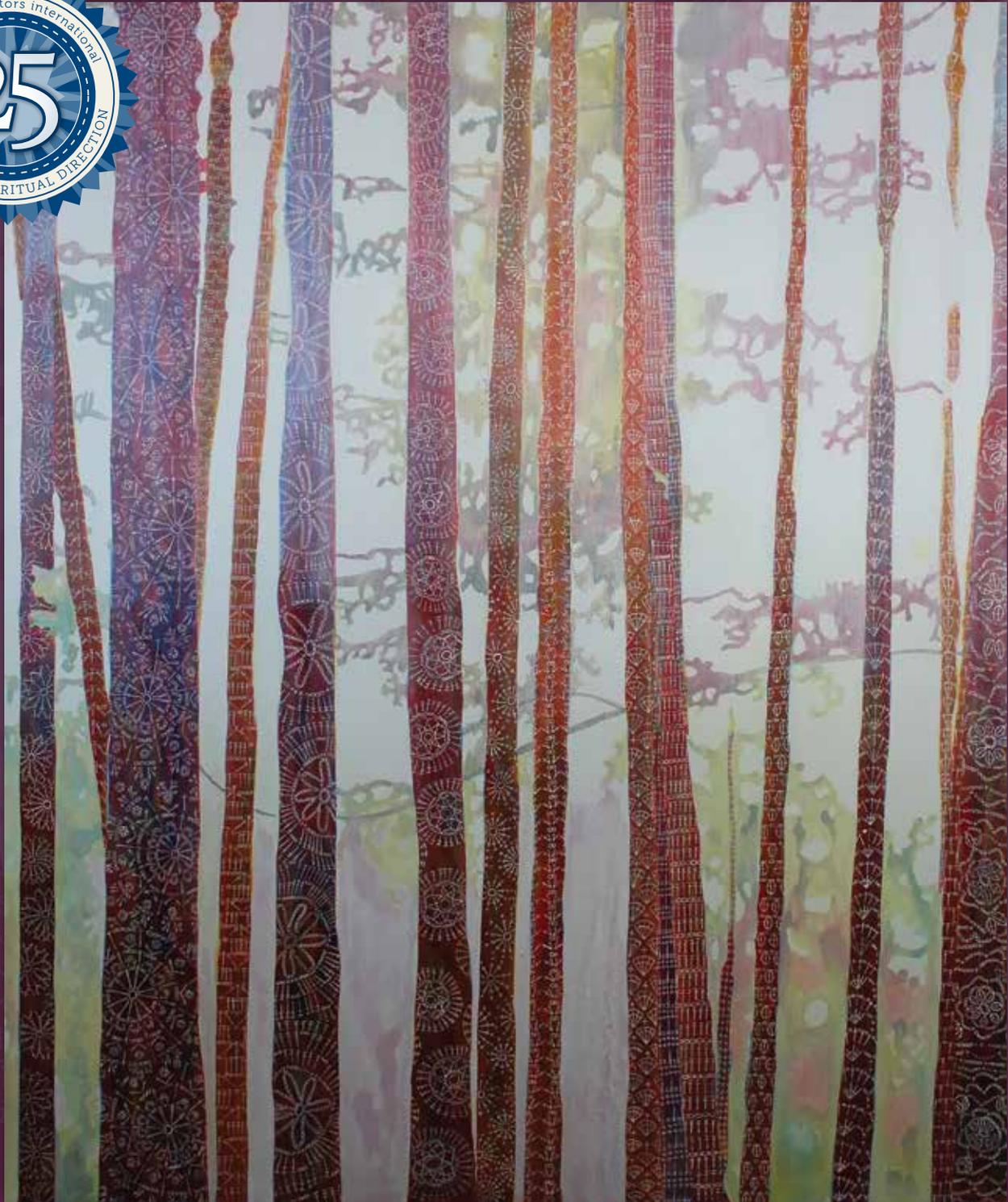
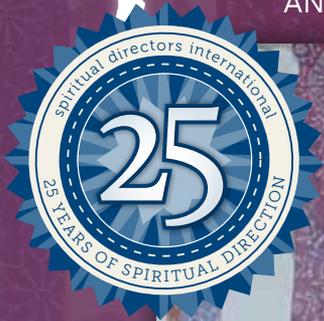


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A Closer Look at Forgiveness • Wendell Berry: The Gift of Place and the Work of Spiritual Direction  
The First Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola Catch Fire • European Insights

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## Wendell Berry: The Gift of Place and the Work of Spiritual Direction

Glenn Mitchell

**W**endell Berry is one of my teachers. His writing in its many forms has been a presence to me for forty years. As a young man fresh out of college, I read all he wrote on farming and gardening. To me he was a prophet standing tall on the land, railing against machines and industrial agriculture. His classic *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* was published in 1977. I read it while finishing seminary, and the critique he offered the United States resounded in my bones as truth.

In my middle years, when I came to poetry, I naturally turned to Berry, a familiar voice who I already trusted as the wise essayist. I discovered in my teacher one who knew more than husbandry. I saw how he stood still and silent upon the land, how he took in the light and the music of the creek, and how he let his place heal what hurt in him. About the time I tuned to his voice, Berry started a practice of writing Sabbath poems—poems that were inspired and written as he spent Sabbath time in silence and solitude upon his farm. I resonated with the first lines in his first poem, “I go among trees and sit still,” in his collection *This Day*. These lines seem to make way for all the Sabbath poems that followed.

I go among trees and sit still.  
All my stirring becomes quiet  
around me like circles on water. —(Berry, *This Day*, 7)

I came late to Berry the novelist, the storyteller, the one who listened deeply not only in the moment but drew stories from his teachers, real and mythic, who tended the land he now stewards. I remember my wife and I curled up in the corner of the commuter gate in the Cincinnati airport reading *Hannah Coulter* aloud to each other on a long Christmas travel day.

Essayist, novelist, poet, and prophet, Berry has worked in many genres to say what is in him to say. His forms change but his themes remain steady, resounding as they do with the depths of his convictions. These years, when

my roots are sinking deeply into the mystical ground of contemplation and spiritual direction, I find myself returning to Berry. Like any good teacher, he is out there ahead of me making an offering that puts light on my path.

### Place

Whether you pick up *The Unsettling of America*, *This Day*, or his novel, *Jayber Crow*, you will encounter Berry’s insistence that our failure to live with and tend the places we are given is at the root of our agricultural, cultural, ecological, political, and spiritual crises.

### VI

Because we have not made our lives to fit  
our places, the forests are ruined, the fields eroded,  
the streams polluted, the mountains overturned. Hope  
then to belong to your place by your own knowledge  
of what it is that no other place is, and by  
your caring for it as you care for no other place, this  
place that you belong to though it is not yours,  
for it was from the beginning and will be to the end. —  
(Berry, *This Day*, 305)

Berry has been tending his knowledge of his place for over fifty years—and his family and friends were on the land for generations before him—but he is saying more here than the knowledge a farmer needs. Knowing our place is the knowledge we need to be human. Our places ground us in what we need to be healed and offer us the intimacy of living awake upon a place that holds possibility for healing the land and the world. Toward the end of the poem, these lines offer a grounded counsel:

Found your hope, then, on the ground under your feet.  
Your hope of Heaven, let it rest on the ground  
underfoot. Be lighted by the light that falls  
freely upon it after the darkness of the nights  
and the darkness of our ignorance and madness.  
Let it be lighted also by the light that is within you,  
which is the light of imagination.... —(Berry, *This Day*,  
306)



### Place and Spiritual Direction

Berry's passion around place stirs a lot of questions in me about spiritual direction. What does it mean for us as spiritual directors to be rooted in a place? What does it mean for us to be at home in our place? I have often had the notion of a spiritual director being like a farrier going out to shod horses with everything she needs in a wooden box and a leather apron. I have had the image of my going out into the world to "do" spiritual direction, traveling light, packing only a candle and a prayer, needing nothing other than the presence I bring and an abiding willingness to sit reverently and attentively before the other and God. I saw the work as creating a safe space where folk could step aside from their many places and be present to God. I saw the heart of spiritual direction as a prayerful conversation transcending the particulars of our place and reaching for the mystery that resounds both deep within us and universally, beyond all our places. Now with Berry's poetry ringing in my spirit, I wonder, has our work become too detached from place?

I see people in a number of settings: at an office I rent from a psychotherapy practice in town, in my meeting room attached to my home, on the telephone with people in other states. I wonder: does the place we meet make a difference? Does it matter to the other how grounded I am in my place as we meet? Does it matter to me?

I have often replied with "No matter. I'm here now. I'm present to the other and God, and the rest will come. This work is not bound by place or time." There is a deep truth in all of that, but I have been pondering with Berry how our separation from place might actually be part of the brokenness we seek to address. I think it is possible that our quality of presence is deepened and opened by the manner in which we tend our places. The way I am present and alive in my own place may make a tangible difference to what I bring to spiritual direction. How grounded I am may impact the quality of my tending the other, the depth of my listening, the porousness of my prayer, and the particularity of my questions. I trust the same is true for the spiritual directee.

### My Place

My meeting place at my home is in a separate building alongside our 1800s log house. It was called "the Shanty" by the previous owners, a plank-walled shed really, which

at various points in its long history was a laundry room, an extra bedroom, a woodshed, and in one corner of the then dirt floor, a dump for old shoes and bottles that passed from their purpose early in the previous century. When I purchased the property in 2009, this was the first space I worked on. It took me a year and a half to complete. In the "meeting room" where I now sit with spiritual directees, the wooden wainscot consists of chestnut boards from a house I took down in the mountains of Virginia, USA, when the slip cover on my hardbound copy of Berry's *The Unsettling of America* was tattered but not faded. More recently I milled, shaped, sanded, and finished each of those boards and nailed them in place. From the time I first pulled the boards from the walls of the "Wilson Place" in the early 1980s till they made their way to the walls of my meeting room, I figure I handled each board about thirty times. When I sit in that space with another, I am surrounded by wood that has gathered my attention and focused my hands many times over these three decades. There is so much of me in that space—none of which is actively in my mind as I meet with someone there, while at the same time, none of which is absent. I am made in part by that work. I am shaped by the particulars of my place and my life with it no less tangibly than those boards are shaped by the intention and attention alive in my hands as I worked them. My work on and my presence to my place over these years is as central to the presence I bring to spiritual direction, as is what I read last week, the training I have completed, or the supervision I receive. Our being rooted in our place may well be the presence point that tips the scale for the other sitting before us. There too we hold lightly, but first we hold—we enter, we work our presence in a place, we ply our work grounded in our place.

Our work as spiritual directors has a spiritual focus, but what Berry has gifted me with is a reminder not to spiritualize the work. The spiritual life is first of all a life. It is not an abstraction. It is rooted somewhere. It is grounded someplace. It is incarnate. Tending our place can help to ground our work; it can help to open the mystery of it again and again to the embodiment of the mystery in our life and in the life of the one before us.

### "Lost in Time, Found in Place"

It is time, not place, which is brought to fluidity again



“Path” — Nicole Emanuel

and again in the spiritual life. We often hear in spiritual direction the grace a spiritual directee experiences when the immediacy of presence breaks open the arbitrary wrappings of time. This stepping outside of “clock time” actually deepens our presence in a place. It heightens our sense of being awake where we are. Notice how whenever we sense time standing still we begin to see more clearly, and more completely, the place we are in. It is as if we awoken with fresh eyes in the place where we are. In this poem, Berry plays with the notion of the ambiguity of time and the particularity of place.

IX

“That’s been an oak tree a long time,”  
said Arthur Rowanberry. How long a time  
we did not know. The oak meant,  
as Art meant, that we were lost  
in time, in which the oak and we had come  
and would go. Nobody knows what

to make of this. It was as if,  
there in the Sabbath morning light,  
we both were buried or unborn while  
the oak lived, or it would fall  
while we stood. But Art, who had  
the benefit of not too much education,  
not too many days pressed between pages  
or framed in a schoolhouse window,  
is long fallen now, though he stands  
in my memory still as he stood  
in time, or stands in Heaven,  
and a few of his memories remain  
a while as memories of mine. To be  
on horseback with him and free,  
lost in time, found in place, early  
Sunday morning, was plain delight.  
We had ridden over all his farm,  
along field edges, through the woods,  
in search of ripe wild fruit, and found



none, for all our pains, and yet  
 “We didn’t find what we were looking for,”  
 said Arthur Rowanberry, pleased,  
 “but haven’t we seen some fine country!”  
 —(Berry, *This Day*, 296)

Bringing intentionality to this grounding in a place is clearly as unique as each of us and as particular as each of our places. In the accompanying box, I offer “Some Suggestions for Nurturing Our Sense of Place” and “Some Suggestions for Nurturing Our Sense of Place Where We Meet with Others.”

It does seem to me there is something here of the monastic vow to stability. Stability posits that where we pray and where we live are the same. Those vowing stability do not flee place or skip away from their life in order to find better spiritual thoughts or more exciting spiritual experiences elsewhere. What we come to and how we live is rooted in a particular place. The gift that is ours to offer in spiritual direction is informed from that place as well. We root our prayer in a place, and the place of prayer becomes the place of meeting. The popular expression “Life is a journey, not a destination” fits a spirituality that is always out there on the road, always off to the next place, the newest thing.

#### Some Suggestions for Nurturing Our Sense of Place:

- Walk daily upon your place or in your neighborhood. It literally grounds us in our place and returns us to what is from our many thoughts about what is.
- If you have some soil on your place, tend it—in pots on the windowsill, if not in the ground. Get your hands in it. Plant or root something. Witness bloom. Grow some food—experience the way your place provides life. Try to eat food from places near to you. Know your farmer.
- Know the creatures you share your place with. Sit with spiders. Count their eyes. Listen to the insects sing in summer. Let the bird’s song speak to you. Trust the knowing of your pet.
- Spend time looking at stars. Make the moon one of your calendars—see how you are synched to it. Anchor your life and work in the larger place that holds all our places.
- Be in the weather every day—do not just look at the weather on a screen—get out in it.
- Experience the sacredness of your place. Sit in it often. Create solitude there. Listen to the silence of your place or let the many noises of your place be invitations to your center. Be done with distractions.
- Stand outside your place and look in. Find the beauty in your looking. Honor the life you see. Tend anything there that needs tending.
- Stand inside your place and look out. Know and pray for the links between your place and all places. Hold to your heart the love that flows between all places.

#### Some Suggestions for Nurturing Our Sense of Place Where We Meet with Others:

- Ground the place by having some objects that are sacred to you. At my place: a few stones from a walk on the beach last fall, a piece of wood curved like a crescent moon, a feather tailored to catch every breeze, a circlet of prayer beads resting on the stand by the chair, and a photograph of the place called home.
- Pray in your meeting place at times other than meeting times. Have the place be an encounter place for you, not simply a place where you encounter others.
- If the space has a window, sit before it. Gaze idly out from your space. Attend the world from your meeting room for a time. Pray for those walking by. Pray for the world from the place where you work and offer spiritual direction.
- Practice the examen in your place of meeting. Journal there. Eat a meal there on a regular basis. Take a nap there if you like to take naps. Inhabit your meeting place. Be at home in your place. Infuse it with your life and your aliveness.
- Feed on poems to strengthen the spiritual muscle that helps listening open beyond understanding into: the mystery of place and Presence, the mystery of the work you do, and the mystery of the ones who sit with you. ■



Stability asserts that we are already where we need to be. We already have what we need. No great journey is necessary. This is our place. Life is not being postponed to some other time, or some other place. We are all “lost in time, found in place.” In “A Spiritual Journey,” Berry shifts the notion of journey to a more grounded place.

### A Spiritual Journey

And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles,  
no matter how long,  
but only by a spiritual journey,  
a journey of one inch,  
very arduous and humbling and joyful,  
by which we arrive at the ground at our feet,  
and learn to be at home.

—(Berry, *The Unforseen Wilderness*, 43)

### The Mystery of the More in a Place and in Others

One of the ways Berry deepens the gift of place is to continue to reach into what is unknown in a place. Berry’s poetry best opens the mystery of place. Poetry uses words in fresh ways to open us to what is beyond all words. There is always more to a place, something we are familiar with in spiritual direction around both the mystery of Presence and the mystery of the other. Our listening attunes there; our listening pulls us deeper into the mystery. Whenever the depth of life in a place or a person is reduced or oversimplified, a vital story is lost. Collectively, what is lost in our neglect of the more is at the root of what is wrong in the world.

V

Those who use the world assuming  
their knowledge is sufficient  
destroy the world. The forest  
is mangled for the sale  
of a few sticks, or is bulldozed  
into a stream and covered over  
with the earth it once stood  
upon. The stream turns foul,  
killing the creatures that once  
lived from it. Industrial humanity,  
an alien species, lives by death.  
In the clutter of facts, the destroyers

leave behind them one big story,  
of the world and the world’s end,  
that they don’t know. They know  
names and little stories. But the names  
of everything are not everything.  
The story of everything, told,  
is only a little story. They don’t know  
the languages of the birds  
who pass northward, feeding  
through the treetops early  
in May, kept alive by knowledge  
never to be said in words.  
Hang down your head. This  
is our hope: Words emerge  
from silence, the silence remains.

—(Berry, *This Day*, 304)

I love in this poem how the language of the birds overlooked by those using the place becomes symbolic of all that is lost. Who can possibly understand the language of the birds? Yet the recognition of their presence is vital to the way the place is held and used. Berry’s poem makes me want to practice a second language and the language of the birds is a good one because learning a second language here is not about actual understanding or mastery, but rather the renewed sense of humility in a place that comes from intentionally living with the more that is there. Attending to such a language can deepen our sense of wonder and curiosity while helping us avoid any tendency to think that full knowledge is ever possible in a place or in a person.

### The Language of Birds

Like Berry, I gravitate toward the language of birds. Birds are a presence in my day that I experience as connection. They are never accidental or coincidental to my day. Listening to their voices as I sit out on my deck at first light anchors me in the day’s beginning. Seeing the red flash of the cardinal as it flies by when I am preparing to meet with someone roots the moment more deeply. Seeing a raven soaring in the sky gives the sky a dimensionality it did not hold for me the moment before. Birds anchor my place in knowledge other than one rooted in industry and production.

Best of any song  
is bird song



in the quiet, but first  
 you must have the quiet.  
 —(Berry, *This Day*, 173)

During the spring migration, I hear bird song at my place that I do not hear other times of the year. I walk around listening for the language that heralds another spring. I listen expectantly for the northern waterthrush that I hear every spring by the water across the road. I smile at the Tennessee warbler's song so loud and insistent in the high ash tree overhead. In the evening, I hear the sound of the woodcock's wings against the wind as it spirals back to earth from the heights of its mating flight. And even more blessed are the sounds I have no names for, sounds that truly evoke the mystery of other lives present upon the place I call home. There are so many stories here more wondrous than what little I know. This is a language that keeps me opening notions of "my place" to a more expansive and inclusive "our place." The tapestry of life here is so rich, so layered, and there is so little of it that I can wrap knowledge around. All of which throws my arms open to a welcome of the mystery. I step from this wonder to the mystery of the meeting room with prayers of gratitude for all I will not understand in the others I meet with this day, all I will hear sing in them beneath what I can name. That spirit helps deepen my listening even as it roots my presence to the other in humility far richer than what little knowledge and insight I might offer.

When I can be outside for my spiritual direction sessions by telephone, I typically choose to. I treasure the antidote to the distance that being out under the sky provides. More than once a spiritual directee in a far state has noticed the bird song in the background. From 400 miles away, the spiritual directee tuned in to another language on my place that at the time I was not listening to. "Bidden or unbidden, God is present" is a message psychotherapist Carl Jung had over the doorway of his place. Birdsong is that reminder at my place.

### Other Languages That Open Place

Many other languages about us offer to open us to the more of our places, the more of Presence. When my friend Jennifer, an herbalist, walks the fields of my place with me, she speaks the language of plants and flowers. As we walk, my head is turned upward toward the birdsong in the trees overhead while her face is turned toward the

ground at our feet where she is noticing the particulars of plants. She hears "a bird" and I see "a plant" but together we open a bit more of the mystery of the place. She talks to me about the properties of the stinging nettles and how they might offer some relief to my arthritic hands, or how the fresh wound on my head from an encounter with a low doorway might find healing with a compress made with leaves from the comfrey plant growing a few steps from that doorway. Or how sap from jewelweed can provide some balm from the poison of the poison ivy plant growing right beside it. All the matter in a place and in a life is connected, and all of it does matter in life and in spiritual direction. Learning a new language can help connect us to the more of our places and our people.

### The Silence Beneath

For a man who loves words in so many genres—the novel, the poem, the essay—Berry is perhaps most comfortable in the silence, and it is the default to which he retreats from words. In the poem "V" quoted above, Berry concludes: "Words emerge from silence, the silence remains." The many languages in a place tend toward silence, for no language can in itself portray a place or a person. Silence helps honor the more that is in all of us. Perhaps it is not so much our words of communication that distinguish us as human beings but rather our ability to choose silence over words to express our deepest communion. Silence keeps our listening sliding off of what we hear to what we cannot hear, but it can also honor and give life to something as a result of the reverence of our listening. Silence breaks our listening from any need to produce, any need to make something of what we are hearing. If I can really listen to the boards in their great silence as I shape them with the tools of my hand, perhaps I can better befriend the inarticulate truths lying silent in the person before me.

XX

Sit and be quiet. In a while  
 the red berries, now in shadow,  
 will be picked out by the sun.  
 —(Berry, *This Day*, 396)

In the silence here, the observer is not making anything happen. The silence creates the space for what is to be received in awareness. Silence gives patience to the work



of attention; silence slows a life so that what is being made before us can be witnessed, can be received in all its beauty. We behold beauty—we do not make it. Silence helps deepen the beholding.

Just as in the liturgical season there is a time for alleluias and a time to refrain from alleluia, praise upon my place in each season speaks a different language. As I write, the deep silence of winter, the stillness of snow, the lone voice of the great horned owl at twilight, speaks to me. Silence is what helps to return me to what is, to let go of what I may want it to be or what I expect it to be. Silence in spiritual direction assists us and our spiritual directees to release expectations and rest in what is arising, even when that reality is more wordless than worded, more unknown than known. Silence is the great tender, beyond all our ability to tend.

### How to Be a Spiritual Director

Berry's poem "How to Be a Poet (to Remind Myself)" could as well be entitled "How to Be a Spiritual Director (to Remind Myself)."

Make a place to sit down.  
 Sit down. Be quiet.  
 You must depend upon  
 affection, reading, knowledge,  
 skill—more of each  
 than you have—inspiration,  
 work, growing older, patience,  
 for patience joins time  
 to eternity. Any readers  
 who like your work,  
 doubt their judgment.

Breathe with unconditional breath  
 the unconditioned air.  
 Shun electric wire.  
 Communicate slowly. Live  
 a three-dimensional life;  
 stay away from screens.  
 Stay away from anything  
 that obscures the place it is in.  
 There are no unsacred places;  
 there are only sacred places  
 and desecrated places.

Accept what comes from silence.  
 Make the best you can of it.  
 Of the little words that come  
 out of the silence, like prayers  
 prayed back to the one who prays,  
 make a poem that does not disturb  
 the silence from which it came.

—(Berry, *New Collected Poems*, 354)

### Beginning Now

I want my work in spiritual direction to include more awareness of place. I want to keep reaching into place for all that I cannot know, trusting that the reaching is part of what grounds me in my work. I want to practice language I cannot possibly master. And I want to return again and again to the silence abiding in my place and in my people. I pray with Berry in "The Wild Geese":

And we pray, not  
 for new earth or heaven, but to be  
 quiet in heart, and in eye,  
 clear. What we need is here.

—(Berry, *New Collected Poems*, 180) ■

### Note

Wendell Berry has written over fifty books of poetry, fiction, and essays. Berry's poetry was compiled in 2012 in *New Collected Poems*, and poems from his Sabbath series were published in 2013 in *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems*.

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